

Eastern seaboard's wetlands in crisis

Gippsland's Jack Smith Lake. Across the eastern states, wetland areas are at a 25-year low, and waterbird numbers are depleted.

Adam Morton

December 10, 2007

FIVE years ago Gippsland's Jack Smith Lake — declared the first state game reserve in Victoria back in 1958 — was full, and home to thousands of birds. In October there were none.

A couple of damp pockets aside, the five-kilometre-wide saline lake south of Sale was parched. According to a new report to four state governments on the health of waterbird populations, it is a story repeated across the eastern states: wetland areas at a 25-year low, and waterbird numbers the second-lowest on record.

Richard Kingsford, the University of NSW environmental scientist behind the annual aerial survey, says the results should mean one thing — no duck hunting season next March.

"This is definitely the worst I've seen it," he said. "We have had so little breeding across a large part of eastern Australia, it means if we had a duck hunting season you would be eroding the breeding capacity."

After years of drought and regulated river operations, waterbird numbers — seen as a barometer for wetland health — are down across the eastern seaboard. The survey found just under 17,000 waterbirds at Victorian survey sites, down from more than 21,000 last year and a 25-year average of 32,300.

Include Queensland, South Australia and NSW, and the total is fewer than 150,000, compared with a long-term average of about 400,000. Of nearly 50 species surveyed, only two non-game birds were breeding.

More than 90% of all breeding was confined to Rhyll Swamp, on Phillip Island. Conversely, a host of species — the grey teal, Australasian shoveler, Australian shelduck, musk duck, Pacific heron, yellow-billed spoonbill and royal spoonbill — were at or near 25-year-low levels.

Professor Kingsford said the stricken populations needed time to recover before duck hunting was allowed. "It's hard to see how it has changed since last year, and given the Government decided not to have a season then, you have to ask why they would next year," he said.

Hunters — who agreed with the decision to cancel this year's season — have challenged Professor Kingsford's recommendation. Field and Game Australia's chief executive, Rod Drew, said floods in Gippsland had boosted duck breeding. And Sporting Shooters Association of Australia president, Bob Cooper, said that while he accepted there was no argument for duck hunting in the state's dry north-west, recent flooding meant things were different in parts of Gippsland.

But Duncan Fraser, a Gippsland birdwatcher for decades, said there was no justification for allowing shooting in the reserve around Jack Smith Lake.

A State Government spokeswoman, Stacy Hume, said the Kingsford report was instrumental in deciding whether there would be a duck hunting season. A decision is expected before the end of the year.